

IMPRESSIONS OF THE GARY SCHOOL SYSTEM

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school system



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THE GARY SCHOOL SYSTEM

BY
F. H. SWIFT

Allen County Public Library
900 Webster Street
PO Box 2270
Fort Wayne IN 46801 2270

Impressions of the Gary School System

F. H. Swift

University of Minnesota

430696

FIIVE years ago it was the Montessori system, today it is the Gary system which is attracting the attention of the school world in the United States. The Montessori system, although not widely adopted, has undoubtedly exerted considerable influence upon school practice. The Gary system will do likewise. Some cities will attempt to Garyize their schools; others will be content with borrowing certain Gary elements. The Montessori system was of special interest to kindergarten and elementary teachers; the Gary system is of especial interest to school superintendents and members of school boards, officers concerned primarily with the organization and financing of schools. The claims of the Gary system may be summed up in a single phrase, "economy and efficiency through superior organization." Somewhat more in detail, the fundamental claims made by Superintendent Wirt and which appear in print at the top of some of his circulars are that by the Gary system children gain twenty per cent. more time; instruction costs ten per cent. less and building and equipment cost forty per cent. less than under the ordinary system. The full significance of the saving secured by reducing the cost of instruction ten per cent. is evident only when we consider that instruction is the largest single item of expense in every school system. More time is gained for the children by substituting a seven and one-half or eight and one-fourth hour school day for the ordinary five hour school day. It is claimed that the cost of building and equipment is decreased by housing under one roof all grades from the kindergarten through the high school and also by making each school seat and desk serve for two children instead of one. This is done by dividing each class into two sections, "A" and "B" and by sending section "B" into shop, laboratory or playground while section "A" is occupying recitation or study room and vice versa. Instruction is cheapened by substituting departmental work and dispensing with supervisors of special subjects. Such supervisors in many systems draw

large salaries, do little or no teaching and spend the major part of their time in working out courses of study, visiting and inspecting classes. The Gary system maintains that in place of spending funds on supervisors, teachers of a high grade should be employed and if such teachers are employed, supervision is unnecessary. The Gary system pins its faith to the individual teacher and excludes the supervisor.

The attention which the Gary system has attracted throughout the United States during the past five years, the movement to incorporate it in many systems at the present time including New York City would be a sufficient reason for a serious consideration of its claims. Nearly all that has thus far appeared in print concerning the Gary schools has been commendatory in the strongest terms. This is all the more significant in view of the fact that among those who have written upon the Gary system have been prominent educators and students of education. The school public is awaiting with interest a careful survey, now under way, and the results of which will soon be made available. Nevertheless it may not be out of place to present at the present time a number of impressions gained during a few days sojourn in Gary, bearing in mind that these judgments are offered merely as impressions and are subject in a number of cases to modification should future data justify such modification. It should be noted, however, that although it may take a year or even longer to determine certain results of a school system, there are many conditions such as cleanliness, sanitary conditions, discipline, etc., which are readily apparent.

In judging the Gary system both with respect to the local situation and with respect to the feasibility of instituting it elsewhere, at least three conditions peculiar to Gary must be borne in mind. These conditions in many cases explain to a certain extent the unsatisfactoriness of certain features of the system as found in Gary and show that it is exceedingly difficult to pass final judgment upon it at the present time:

(1) The population of Gary is, to a large extent, a transient one. The prosperity or hard times which mark the life of an industrial community tend to cause frequent changes in population. To judge the soundness of the principles underlying the Gary system by the attainment of pupils now in school would be, to a certain extent, unfair.

(2) The second condition is the rapid increase in population which makes it difficult to supply school facilities at the rate needed.

(3) The schools are sadly lacking in financial support. The school tax is based upon a valuation estimated on an average of eighteen months previous to the time when the tax is collected; meanwhile the multiplication of industrial plants has brought in hundreds of children who must be cared for. The schools are consequently over-crowded and the number of teachers insufficient.

With these special conditions in mind, we may now turn to a more direct consideration of the Gary system and the validity of its claims. The final result of a brief but careful inspection of the Gary school system can hardly fail to lead an unprejudiced observer to the conviction that the Gary system can neither be accepted nor condemned *in toto*. At least eleven characteristics of the system deserve commendation. Our attention will be given to these first.

(1) One of the professed aims of the Gary system is to provide within the school itself abundant opportunity for work and for play as well as for study. The Gary system sets aside two hours for play and for work in some form for nearly every child. Few school systems have made such a generous provision for play. The Emerson school has a playground of three acres for about two thousand pupils. These playgrounds are well equipped. Both schools have excellent gymnasiums and separate swimming pools for boys and girls. The Gary system is in the first rank from the standpoint of the provision it makes for playgrounds.

(2) The course of study has been enriched by introducing into it many activities which are designed to bring the child into contact with vital social interests and to afford him some direct preparation for earning a livelihood.

(3) Cultural studies are not neglected. Such studies as music, art and the languages are given a prominent place in the school program. Music and art form a part of the education of every child. Every effort is made to acquaint the students not only with current literature but with the English classics as well. The works of the English classical writers are included in the course of study and their volumes occupy a conspicuous place in the library where definite instruction in the use of books is given to the chil-

dren by trained librarians. That the traditional cultural studies are not neglected is further evident from the fact that the number of students studying Latin in Gary exceeds the number studying French and German. This, of course, in the minds of many may be a questionable merit.

(4) The course is not made subservient to local industrial interests. The question has frequently been raised by those who have not visited Gary as to whether the schools were not over vocationalized and also whether the industrial trend of the schools is not dominated by local industries for the purpose of supplying Gary shops with workers. Nothing observed in the schools would justify any such conclusion. Moreover, teachers in charge of non-vocational studies flatly denied this implication. On the contrary, they stated that no effort is made to teach the trades and occupations carried on in local industrial plants. They explained this by saying that Superintendent Wirt maintains that the chances of those who are now children remaining in Gary after they have reached adult years is so small that such an aim would be unwarrantable.

(5) The Gary program is flexible rather than uniform and rigid. Instead of attempting to establish the same program for all schools throughout the city, the program of each school is adapted, so far as possible, to the needs of the district which it serves. More than this, the program is arranged in such a manner that boys and girls who desire to work outside of school hours are given an opportunity to do so.

(6) The discipline in the Gary schools is based upon principles thoroughly in accord with the best understanding of child nature. Freedom and independent action are encouraged. Pupils leave their seats as necessity dictates, not as the arbitrary decision of the teacher permits. They move freely about the halls. The success with which this type of discipline is being carried out in Gary is, however, open to serious question but this aspect of it is reserved for consideration in a subsequent paragraph.

(7) Teachers are encouraged to show spontaneity and initiative in their work. This is done (1) by doing away with supervision; (2) by excluding any rigid system of controlling the manner in which periods of instruction are to be used; (3) by definitely encouraging the individual teacher to experiment with original methods of teaching.

(8) More advanced or older students render assistance in laboratory and shop. As the result, pupils are taught to make some return for what they receive from the community. Further, a sense of responsibility is developed. Moreover, by this means, younger students are thrown gradually into types of work which will be open to them later on if they choose to enter them.

(9) The policy of gradually familiarizing students of lower grades with the work of the upper grades is a commendable feature of the system. In addition to the method presented in the preceding paragraph, a number of others are employed. In the auditorium during assembly periods, upper classes present types of their work for the benefit of the lower classes. Exhibits of various sorts are displayed in the halls. Among these may be mentioned historical, geographic and physiographic maps, charts and models, photographs of the occupations carried on in various shops and laboratories.

(10) The Gary schools, so far as possible, are made to serve the entire community. "All the schools all the time for all the people" is a Gary slogan. Some of the means employed to realize this aim are (1) extension classes for adults; (2) a four semester plan; (3) keeping the schools open evenings and on Saturday for children who are behind in their studies or who are especially interested in a particular type of work.

(11) The teaching force connected with the Gary schools has an attitude toward their work and toward their pupils that impresses one as being unusually sympathetic and co-operative. The teachers with whom I talked seemed to be thoroughly interested in the children under their instruction and in the system and to believe in the sincerity which animates the plan. None with whom I talked made any complaint regarding the long hours or being over-worked. One stated definitely that Superintendent Wirt is opposed to teachers working after school hours and over against the long school day she set the fact that most teachers, when they left the school house, left their school duties behind them.* From this brief survey of the merits of the Gary system, let us turn to the other side.

The Gary system points with pride to the fact that it cuts the cost of instruction by doing away with supervisors. Supervisors

* This should be compared with statement on p. 11. "Practically every teacher in the system teaches night school not from choice but from necessity."

are regarded as an expensive superfluity, yet on every hand in the Gary schools are conditions which would not be tolerated elsewhere and which adequate supervision would remedy at once. The individual teacher always tends to become absorbed in the subject he is teaching and consequently oblivious to physical conditions. Moreover it may seriously be doubted whether there is any system in the United States which is prepared to pay the salaries necessary to secure a body of teachers of such quality as to need little or no supervision. In every system will be found a small number of teachers who perhaps need no supervision, a considerable number who need little supervision, a large number who require much supervision. The salaries which Gary is paying at the present time will be discussed later. It may not be out of place here to note in passing that they are not such as to warrant any belief that the quality of teachers secured will be such as to make possible doing away with a large amount of supervision without disastrous results.

The first evidence of the need of supervision which I observed in the Gary schools was dirt. The fact that Gary is an industrial and therefore a smoke-ridden city might be some explanation for a degree of griminess in classrooms and laboratories but it can hardly be offered as an excuse for the total general lack of tidiness which began in the large outer office of the superintendent where scraps of paper littered the floor and extended to the toilets in the basement. A state inspector of schools, from another state, remarked, as we passed out of one of the rooms, that the Gary schools—unless they cleaned up—would be dropped from the approved state list of schools in his state.

Another crying evidence of the need of supervision is the almost universal indifference to proper light conditions and the sinful injury being done to the children's eyes in not one but in many rooms. In the Emerson school, an English class sat in the front part of a science room. It was a study period. The portion of the room which the class occupied was surrounded by three solid walls. Conditions were made worse by cross lights caused by a certain amount of daylight filtering through from windows at the back of the room. Every child in the class appeared to be straining his eyes. Several of them held their books high above their heads in an endeavor to bring their texts closer to the artificial lights. Even worse conditions existed in a room in

Jefferson school where moving pictures were being shown. As a member of a committee investigating moving picture houses, I have had the opportunity of seeing a great variety of moving picture screens. The moving pictures on the screen in the Jefferson School were so dim as to be almost indiscernible. In addition to this, there was a continuous succession of violent flashes. It is difficult to understand how the children could endure looking at the screen at all. Those in charge of the exercise appeared oblivious to everything except the story they were presenting. At the Froebel school, similar evils were apparent and a similar indifference to the pupils' eyes. In one room we visited the teacher had placed his portable blackboard in a corner where there was almost no light. The small group of boys to whom he was describing the drawing had evident difficulty in seeing the lines. Nevertheless the blackboard remained in this, the darkest corner of the room although there was plenty of space elsewhere in the room where the blackboard could have been placed and where the light would have fallen upon it.

One of the most important means by which Gary attempts to save money is by making the same seat and desk serve two different children by the plan described in the opening paragraph of this article. The dangers of such a policy are great, especially in overcrowded communities. Sooner or later, there is bound to come a time as the result of overcrowding when the pupils of one grade will be placed in seats purchased for another. Gary has not escaped this evil. We found one class of high school students, seniors we were informed, occupying grade school seats. They sat with their knees hunched up towards their chins and their bodies twisted. At the present time we are endeavoring in our schools to adjust both the seat and desk as accurately as possible to the physical measurements of the individual child. The Gary platoon system makes such an attempt absolutely impossible unless the seat and desk are adjusted during the school day, a thing which is not likely to be done. Moreover, in Gary we found few adjustable seats.

One of the outstanding features of the Gary system and one which it emphasizes are the auditorium exercises. These exercises are in many cases, no doubt, beneficial but the advantages can not be attributed to the policy *per se*. The advantages every time will depend upon the character of the exercise and the char-

acter of the exercises cannot be guaranteed without careful supervision. Left to the judgment of the individual teacher such exercises as one of those we attended in the Froebel School will be frequent. The temperature in the auditorium when we entered it was probably 80 degrees. The children were restless, inattentive and gazing around. One of the exercises consisted of a lecture on the mechanics of stoves given by one of the shop instructors. It was given in language suited to a university class. The room was filled with children of a wide range of grades and ages. Needless to say, the lecturer received little attention from his audience. Not only were the majority of children almost entirely inattentive, but there was so much talking in an undertone that only the pupils in the front part of the room could hear what the lecturer was saying. One of the supposed benefits of these exercises is that children are taught how to conduct themselves in such assemblies.

The amount of time allowed for play in the Gary system commends it to all who believe that the physical nature of the child should receive first consideration. However, if children need two hours of play during an eight-hour school day, the question at once arises whether these two hours might not better be divided into three 40 minute periods or four 30 minute periods rather than into two periods of an hour each. Moreover, in order to meet the desire of certain students to work outside of school or to attend classes for religious instruction, both of the two much lauded play periods have been placed at noon in some schools. In other instances one play period comes at the beginning and one at the end of the day's session. The result is that many children have no play period during school hours.

The success with which the principles of liberty and freedom are being applied to discipline in the Gary schools both within and without the classroom is doubtful. The conduct in the corridors of the older pupils who are supposed to be upon a basis of self control in many instances was loud and vulgar. We passed girls jouncing each other around in the halls and talking loudly. In a word, in the absence of traditional discipline, roughhouse manners prevailed. In many classrooms the instruction was good and the pupils attentive; in many others, the pupils gave little or no attention to the lesson and the teachers had to make frequent appeals to them for attention and attention, when

given, was given with the air of conscious condescension. In one class the teacher threatened to give up the lesson altogether unless the pupils stopped lashing each other's faces with the pussywillows which were supposed to be the subject of this lesson.

Any system which claims to provide education at a reduced cost while at the same time enriching and socializing the course of study is bound to receive a public hearing. Any system, however, which bases its claims to consideration upon the basis of cutting down the cost of equipment and of instruction may well be viewed with suspicion at the present time. Contrary to opinion, widely current outside of Gary, the salaries of the teachers are lamentably low. In one of the offices were tables and charts giving data with reference to the teachers' salaries. According to these charts the median of living expenses of Gary teachers is \$1046.50. The median of total earnings from teaching, including outside lessons and night school work, is \$881.04. We were informed that practically every teacher in the system teaches night school not from choice but from necessity, as the contract salary does not meet the living expenses. The median contract salary of 134 teachers is \$796.50. A large number of teachers receive salaries ranging from \$500 to \$600 per year. Of these 134 teachers, only 35 per cent. do not contribute toward the support of others. Of the 65 per cent. who do contribute to the support of others, 44 per cent. are responsible for such support.*

From our survey of the merits and defects of the Gary schools, we may now turn to a few concluding impressions. A glance at the eleven features commended in the earlier paragraphs will reveal the fact that none of them are features peculiar to Gary and also that they are not the features upon which Gary bases

* Subsequent to the writing of the present article there has appeared in the "New Republic" (July 1, 1916) an article entitled "The Teachers and the Gary Plan." This article states that "Only New York and three or four cities on the Pacific coast give their elementary teachers a higher average income than does Gary." It continues "The average salary of persons actually in charge of elementary classes is \$895, and exclusive of additional pay for evening classes and summer work."

I can only say that the figures I have given were, as I have already stated, taken from charts compiled by the Gary school authorities themselves to be used, I was informed, as campaign material in an effort to get the salaries of Gary teachers raised to a living wage. The impression concerning the status of teachers' salaries in Gary conveyed by the article in the "New Republic" is in every respect contrary to that conveyed by the charts exhibited. It should be noted that the data given in the "New Republic" present averages whereas the charts gave medians.

her claims for consideration. Defects which in other systems might be passed over somewhat leniently cannot be overlooked in the Gary system because it is being presented to the school public as a model and because many systems and superintendents are approaching it from this standpoint. Such a claim justifies a careful scrutiny of every practice. Judged by school conditions observed in Gary at the time of my visit in the spring of 1916 the Gary system is an irrefutable argument against its own policies. It is a monument to the need of supervision, the evils arising from the lack of the same and the folly of economy sought through the channels Gary utilizes. I have never seen within the same amount of time and within the same number of classes in any other system of the same size the laws of child life, both physical and mental, so flagrantly violated. For the school world at large, Gary may serve in some respects as an example; but in quite as many others as a warning. Perhaps the greatest service it has performed is to bring in the fact that it has provoked discussion and stimulated thought. However unwise it would be to install it elsewhere, certain features of it can be incorporated with advantage in a large number of school systems. The Gary system probably contains no feature not to be found in many other less heralded school systems, nevertheless it has brought together in a manner witnessing to the originality and initiative of its Superintendent a multitude of excellent features which, although heretofore found in many individual systems have perhaps never or seldom been so ingeniously unified. It has organized them and created a unique and interesting situation.

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